



Klamath Network Featured Creature

May 2006

California kangaroo rat (*Dipodomys californicus*)

FIELD NOTES:

General Description:

The California kangaroo rat is one of 22 species of kangaroo rats belonging to the Family Heteromyidae. Adults of this species average 30-31 cm long, including a tail that can be 150 times the body length! They weigh 60-85 g, about as much as a plum tomato. California kangaroo rats are identifiable by their small forefeet; large hindfeet; and long, tufted, white-tipped tail. This species differs from many other kangaroo rats in that it has four toes per hindfoot while other species have five. The rat's silky fur is pale brown dorsally and cream-colored ventrally, commonly with variations of black and white markings on the face and tail. They do not vocalize often, instead communicating through scent marks and foot drumming.

Behavior:

California kangaroo rats are nocturnal and active year-round. This species is aggressively solitary and territorial, but mates several times from February to September. The rat's main defense against predators is to leap away with its powerful hindfeet, although the California species is more prone to scurrying than to leaping. A common behavior of the rat is to take dust baths to remove extra oils.

Feeding:

The California kangaroo rat's basic diet consists of seeds, grasses, and insects. They have external, fur-lined cheek pouches to store food. The rats will also cache food in shallow pits for later consumption. Rarely drinking water, the California kangaroo rat has highly efficient kidneys to conserve moisture and metabolically obtains water from its food sources. They also neither pant nor sweat, allowing them to conserve moisture in this manner as well.

Where to see it in the Klamath Parks:

While California kangaroo rats have been recorded at Lassen Volcanic National Park and Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, your best bet for catching a glimpse of these critters is at Lava Beds National Monument. Pay extra attention on the roads of the Monument at night, as these nocturnal creatures are often found along the roadsides.



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Habitat:

Dipodomys californicus prefer open grasslands and mixed chaparral areas. They will burrow in loose soil, usually along the base of a shrub or rock. If the soil is too hard to burrow in, the kangaroo rat will occupy abandoned burrows from larger rodents, such as ground squirrels.

Distribution:

The species is generally found below 1,310 ft (400 m) in elevation, although they have been found in areas as high as 4,270 ft (1300 m). They are only found in dry open areas of southern Oregon and northern California. Each individual occupies a territory of about a half-acre and they do not migrate during their short lifetimes.

Status:

While some species of kangaroo rat are endangered, the California kangaroo rat is not under any official listed status. Before 1976, the California kangaroo rat was considered a race of the Heermann's kangaroo rat. However, research yielded that the similarities were more superficial than genuine; the California kangaroo rat was then reclassified as its own species.

Additional Information:

For more information on *Dipodomys californicus*, visit the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology Animal Diversity Web: http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Dipodomys_californicus.html